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ABSTRACT

The issues and problems faced today in regard to reading instruction were reviewed, and suggestions for meeting Commissioner Allen's challenge of the "Right to Read" were made. Three realities in United States education today include (1) the generally higher quality of the products of our schools than in the past, (2) startling statistical evidence of national reading deficiencies, and (3) society's demands for higher levels of accomplishment to meet our national goals. Educational professionals must face this challenge by taking the following steps toward achieving the goal of the right to read for all: (1) challenge the normal curve, (2) define quality of instruction according to the impact upon a learner, (3) base instruction upon the student's ability to understand it, (4) persevere, and (5) allow ample time for learning to take place. In conclusion, specific steps that state and local councils can take to implement the "Right to Read" movement were enumerated. (CL)

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# The Issues and the Challenge of The Right to Read

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Toledo, Ohio
November 15, 1969

September 23, 1969 may well prove to have been a most significant day for American education. On that day James E. Allen, Jr. Delivered his now famous address -- "The Right to Read--Target for the 70's." Commissioner Allen has issued a challenge to America's schools and teachers to find a way during the 70's to teach all students to read successfully. This will call for a mammoth effort but it can and must be done. This morning I would like to review the issues and problems as we face today's realities in regard to reading instruction and then suggest some things that we can do to meet Mr. Allen's challenge.

Assuming that the target that all shall read is both desirable and attainable within the 70's, where do we now stand?

## Today's Realities

If we look at the realities of the educational scene today we can find compelling reasons to be encouraged, to be disheartened, and certainly to be challenged. It is encouraging to note that the general quality of the products of our schools is good. Colleges and Universities can attest to the fact that in spite of the growing proportion of young people continuing their education beyond high school, entering freshmen are better prepared than in past generations. Hudson Smith, writing in the Winter 1969 issue of the Key Reporter (Phi Beta Kappa) suggests that today's student is about two years more mature intellectually than those of past generations although he enters college at essentially the same chronological age. Several other evidences could be listed to emphasize the positive side of the ledger including the promenades on the moon, the quality and quantity of materials children are reading, the increased demands of the school curriculum and the results of the restandardization of the norms of reading tests. The vast majority of America's students are reading better than at any time in the past. Even in the ghettos of our cities where schools are often rightly criticized for their ineffectiveness, many examples can be given of creative, effective school programs. The knowledge to be successful exists. We can, therefore, start our analysis of realities on a positive note.

But there are other realities that are disheartening and perhaps shocking enough to cause us to do something about them. In spite of the knowledge that has accumulated about reading, in spite of better materials more abundantly supplied and a teaching force holding higher academic credentials

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than at any time in our history Commissioner Allen* has listed the following facts about reading deficiencies:

--One out of every four students nationwide has significant reading deficiencies. (Other estimates suggest fifteen percent as a more accurate figure--regardless, the statistic is shocking.)

--In large city school systems up to half of the students read below expectation.

--There are more than three million illiterates in our adult population.

--About half of the unemployed youth, ages 16-21, are functionally illiterate.

--Three-quarters of the juvenile offenders in New York City are two or more years retarded in reading.

--In a recent U.S. Armed Forces program called Project 100,000, 60.2 percent of the young men fell below grade seven in reading and academic ability.

Facts such as these hurt dedicated professionals. We are prone to react that these failures are a reflection of factors far more inclusive than the school. Perhaps we can sooth our feelings in the observation that if our schools are, in fact, shameful, the responsibility rests not only upon the school but also upon a society that is not truly supporting its schools. However, we are the professionals. It is our responsibility to take action to remove this barrier to success for so many of our young people.

A third reality increases the need for immediate action to insure that all students do successfully learn to read in the 70's. All projections of our nation's development indicate that higher levels of accomplishment will be needed to meet our national goals. U. S. Department of Labor studies indicate that the occupations concentrated at the top of the skill ladder will have the largest percentage of increase in the decade immediately ahead. In a recent address Philip J. Rutledge suggested that skill had replaced property as the primary economic value in America. The implication is that America must find its future vitality in its brain power.

In summary, three realities exist. Too many students are leaving school with poorly developed reading skills. At the same time society is demanding higher levels of accomplishment. Finally, the professional competence exists to do something about the situation.

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*"The Right to Read-Target for the 70's" -- address of U.S. Commissioner of Education, James E. Allen, Jr. before the National Association of State Boards of Education, Los Angeles, September 23, 1969.

Facing the Challenge Having faced reality what do we do about it? Commissioner Allen's challenge to the profession is not a simple, "We must do a better job boys. The statistics are poor, can't we improve them?" is not his question. Rather he is saying that all have the right to read. The target for the 70's is not 75 or 85 percent but essentially 100 percent success.

Is this realistic? Indeed it is! How could we possibly tolerate a lesser target? What professional worthy of the title could say, "I am not concerned about 25 percent, or 20, or 15, or even 5 percent of the students I serve." A hard headed schoolman could react, "Yes, in that sense it is a realistic target but practicalities make it an impossible dream. I am not a Don Quixote." Commissioner Allen's challenge will meet with mixed reactions but let us not be guilty of seeking excuses for our inaction.

Several factors support the realism of Mr. Allen's target. The trend in American education has progressed steadily toward this goal. For example, a recent USOE report indicated that of 1,000 fifth graders in school seven years previously, 721 graduated from high school in 1967; 621 in 1960; 505 in 1950 and 454 in 1940. As indicated before the product of the high school is achieving at a significantly higher level than in the past. Furthermore, several experimental programs have met with high degrees of success and at this time there is a flurry of activity to upgrade reading instruction. This activity has been well summarized in the Target Series, four monographs developed in cooperation with ERIC/CRIER and available from the International Reading Association. Carl Smith who directed the development of the monographs carefully gathered evidence from across the nation of effective reading programs as a guide to decision makers in the schools.

As reading teachers won't you join me in responding to Mr. Allen that we accept his Target for the 70's, The Right to Read for all students as a challenge we intend to meet?

The task to be done

At several places in this address the point of all learning to read has been stressed deliberately. Benjamin Bloom* has pointed out that our schools have evolved a system that tolerates a third of the students doing poorly with or in fact failing to learn what the school attempts to teach them. The result is that a teacher facing a group of students expects a third will learn what he has to teach, a third will be mediocre, and a third will essentially do poorly or fail. This expectation is supported by our testing programs, by school policies and by our grading practices. Little wonder that the whole system creates a self-fulfilling prophecy to be finally revealed in the report card and in the results of standardized tests.

We are now committed to the idea that all must learn. Old practices must be challenged and new strategies developed to build success for all. Fortunately much thinking and experimentation by Bloom, Bruner, Goodlad,

*Benjamin Bloom, "Learning for Mastery", Evaluation Comment, May, 1968.

Carroll, Suppes, Anderson, Glaser, Ellson and many others serve as a basis to develop these strategies. Furthermore, the application of the Convergence Technique to research in reading has been structured to reach a literacy goal for essentially all of our student population. The Convergence Technique is a way of structuring research efforts to meet a specific goal. The technique was developed to organize the research efforts in regard to cancer. Its first application in education is to reading. This application is being made under a USOE contract with Phi Delta Kappa and will be used as a master strategy in planning and supporting research in reading.

You and I are teachers. What do we do to work toward the goal that all learn? A first step is to challenge the normal curve. We use the normal curve as an absolute standard and have developed a whole system of measuring achievement relating to it. A standardized reading test does not reveal how well a student in fact reads. It merely compares one student's performance on the test with that of another. Differences might be quite trivial but percentages and grades are assigned on the basis of these comparisons. There is nothing sacred about the normal curve. It does describe chance and random activity quite accurately. But what teacher would say that the results of his purposeful teaching are random or chance results? We seek to have our students learn what we teach. If we are successful in our teaching the results simply can not be described by the laws of probability. Of course, there are differences in learners and differences in aptitudes. Individual differences must be taken into account but in such a way as to develop an individual's potential to the fullest. Bloom has suggested several variables for the teacher experimenter to consider when planning strategies for all to learn.

The first variable to adjust to is aptitude. If students are normally distributed in aptitude and instruction is the same for all in amount, quality, and time, achievement will be normally distributed. This is typical practice as the high correlations (70+) between aptitude and achievement tests reveal. The converse follows. If students are normally distributed with respect to aptitude but the kind, quality and time of instruction are varied to be appropriate to the characteristics of each learner the vast majority of students can be expected to achieve master of the subject. The relationship between aptitude and achievement will approach zero.

Aptitude can not be denied but its significance can be overplayed. Perhaps 5 percent have a very high aptitude in an area and another 5 percent essentially no aptitude. John Carroll has suggested that for the 90 percent remaining aptitude is predictive more of rate of learning than it is of level of learning. Mastery by 95 percent of learners is reasonable assuming that some students will take more effort, time, and help to achieve a given level than will others. As teachers and as learners we also know that aptitude is not stable. School and home can make a difference. Some children are fortunate in coming from fail safe homes. Others are fortunate in being truly turned on by teachers who create an environment in which students can find themselves. In reading instruction this is best manifested in students who truly desire to read.

A second variable that we can adjust to is quality of instruction. Traditionally we conceive of good teaching in terms of group achievement. Now we must use a different basic assumption. Different students may need very different types and qualities of instruction to achieve mastery. Quality of instruction must be defined on the basis of the impact upon the learner. Doctoral studies at Indiana University, for example, have attempted to relate instruction patterns to personality characteristics of both teachers and learners. Simula's study indicated that characteristics such as high rigidity and high anxiety among seven year olds can be a significant factor in what form of instruction is most effective in teaching phonics generalizations. Good teaching is revealed by what the students do and not by a given set of teacher characteristics.

A third factor we can adjust to is the student's ability to understand instruction. A simple minded observation perhaps, but nevertheless a key factor for lack of learning. We rely very heavily upon verbal instruction when the truth is that our students exhibit great variation in verbal ability. The range of instructional resources now available is tremendous. We must learn to use them more effectively.

A fourth factor of significance in learning for mastery is perseverance. Carroll defines perseverance as the amount of time the learner is willing to spend in learning. If he needs more time to learn but does not give it he is in trouble. To the teacher perseverance has two implications. The first suggests the importance of realistic goals and the second the role of motivation in learning.

A last factor that the teacher needs to consider is to allow enough time for learning to take place. The school handles learning to read largely by the calendar and the clock. Time starts at about age six. Bells ring, pages turn, new books appear all on time. John Carroll suggests that time spent on learning is the key to mastery. Each student should be allowed the time he needs to learn a subject. Time then should be considered in terms of the convenience of the learner and not that of the labels on the backs of the books, the curriculum structure, or the gradation system.

These five factors are ones that we can do something about the next time we meet our students. Furthermore, while in the final analysis the judgment as to whether the challenge has been met will depend upon what has been done in the nation's classrooms, the effort made must go beyond that of individual classroom teachers. You are a professional group working in a specific area -- The Ohio Council of the International Reading Association. Action needs to be started on the state and local levels to build the momentum for the Right-to-Read movement to succeed. The Ohio Council and the local councils you represent can:

--Organize state and local committees of professional people, business, industry and community representatives, labor and civic groups to establish benchmarks and to develop plans to meet the educational target for the 70's.

--Gather and disseminate information as to what is being done to help children who need help and to determine who needs further assistance. Your journal, The Ohio Reading Teacher, can serve as the resource for doing this.

--Inform the public through the various media of state and local needs, programs and services.

--Establish workshops and conferences to better prepare teachers to meet the goal that all will read.

--Become a collective voice to urge responsible action by school and government officials. It would be appropriate for this conference on this last day of American Education Week, 1969 to pass resolutions to state and local officials urging support of the Right to Read program to the end that all Ohio children will be prepared for full citizenship in the 70's.

Today is the day to close ranks and to act. The Target for the 70's is attainable. Let it not be said in some future judgment that the battle was lost because it was never joined.